

Approach and Avoidance Motivation

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In this article, we introduce this special issue by establishing a conceptual foundation for the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. We do so primarily by explicating several reasons why the approach–avoidance distinction should be viewed as fundamental and basic to the study of human behavior. In addition, we compare and contrast the “approach–avoidance” designation with other designations that have been used in the motivational literature to cover the same or similar conceptual ground. Finally, we conclude by briefly overviewing the other contributions to this special issue, specifically highlighting how they make use of the approach–avoidance distinction.

KEY WORDS: approach–avoidance; appetitive; aversive; motivation; valence.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a pervasive and important determinant of behavior for students, teachers, and administrators at all educational levels (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). In order to understand the educational experience, one must comprehend what motivates behavior in the school setting; furthermore, intervention programs and procedures that fail to take motivational considerations into account are destined for failure. This special issue of *Educational Psychology Review* focuses on one particular aspect of motivation: the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. Motivation may be defined as the energization (i.e., instigation) and direction of behavior. Approach and avoidance motivation differ as a function of *valence*: In approach motivation, behavior is instigated or directed by a positive/desirable event

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or possibility; in avoidance motivation, behavior is instigated or directed by a negative/undesirable event or possibility (Elliot, 1999). We contend that approach–avoidance is not just an important motivational distinction, but that it is fundamental and basic, and should be construed as the foundation on which other motivational distinctions rest.

We begin by explicating several reasons why the approach–avoidance distinction deserves a central place in conceptualizations of motivation. Then, we address terminological considerations regarding the “approach–avoidance motivation” designation and discuss some related conceptual issues. Finally, we introduce the other contributions to this special issue, emphasizing how they illustrate the importance and utility of the approach–avoidance distinction. The contributors to this special issue were participants in an American Educational Research Association symposium in 1998 entitled “Approach and Avoidance Motivation in Achievement Settings.” Although the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is clearly relevant across life domains, the primary focus of these contributions is on the achievement domain. Nevertheless, we feel that in making the case for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction, it is best to remain at the general level of analysis.

APPROACH AND AVOIDANCE AS A BASIC CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTION

One argument for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction is that it has a long and rich history in intellectual thought. The origin of the approach–avoidance distinction may be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers Democritus (460–370 B.C.) and Aristippus (435–356 B.C.), who espoused an ethical hedonism that proscribed the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the central guide for human behavior. The first thinker to straightforwardly articulate a psychological hedonism, in which the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain not only represented an ethical proscription but also a description of how humans actually tend to behave, was the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Bentham (1779/1879) offered the following strong dictum in his *Introduction to the Principles and Morals of Legislation*: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we should do . . . they govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think” (p. 1).

Within the fold of psychology proper, many of the major theorists of motivation and personality have incorporated the approach–avoidance distinction into their conceptualizations. This use of the approach–avoidance

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